

Study: Motivation is key for teachers to overcome racial bias in classroom

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Dr. Revathy Kumar's study about culturally inclusive teaching shows the motivation to appear unprejudiced alone does not result in a positive and meaningful change in teachers' classroom-related beliefs and instructional practices. Credit: University of Toledo

New research focused on college students training to become K-12 teachers emphasizes the need to recruit and enroll more diverse students in teacher education programs.

The study about culturally inclusive teaching published in the journal *Learning and Instruction* shows the motivation to appear unprejudiced alone does not result in a positive and meaningful change in teachers' classroom-related beliefs and instructional practices.

For this to happen, it is important that teachers are also motivated to be unprejudiced—that is, to act in an unprejudiced way because it is personally important to them as opposed to acting unprejudiced because it is the politically correct thing to do or they feel pressured by others.

"All of us carry biases—it's natural because we're human," said Dr. Revathy Kumar, professor of educational psychology in The University of Toledo Judith Herb College of Education. "What we do about our awareness of those biases makes a difference to our students, their comfort in the classroom, their academic efficacy, self-esteem and academic performance. It is vital for teachers to be motivated to be genuinely unprejudiced to overcome [racial bias](#) and create an inclusive learning environment."

The study found that pre-service teachers' genuine desire to be unprejudiced was positively associated with their endorsement of culturally and motivationally supportive instructional practices. A genuine desire to be unprejudiced also was negatively associated with expressions of explicit [bias](#) toward minority students.

The study also shows that the [positive impact](#) of being motivated to be unprejudiced—the preservice teachers' commitment to promoting respect in the classroom and adapting instructions for culturally [diverse students](#)—gets amplified if the [teacher](#)-in-training also wants to appear unprejudiced.

"However, just wanting to appear unbiased in the absence of a genuine desire to be unbiased is insufficient," Kumar said. "Every student should

feel that he or she belongs, not isolated or alienated. This can only happen if we create culturally inclusive learning environments that are responsive to students' academic, social and emotional needs. This requires teachers to become aware that they and their students are cultural beings."

The research adds additional credence to ongoing advocacy efforts proposing that it is essential for Black and other [minority students](#) to see members of their community present in the teacher workforce.

The study used a sample of 258 [college students](#) studying to become teachers—82 percent white, 9.7 percent Black, 3.1 percent Latinx, 1.6 percent Asian American, 0.7 percent American Indian, 2.7 percent biracial and 1.6 percent other.

Findings indicated that white pre-service teachers on average displayed a distinct and significant preference for [white students](#) over Black students, whereas minority teachers on average didn't show preference.

"What is valued in society influences how we think and feel even about our own group," Kumar said. "Therefore, it is important to note minority pre-service teachers are not insulated from holding bias toward students of color."

"I would love to follow these same pre-service teachers into the classroom," Kumar said. "We have all these beliefs and biases, and we have these motivations to be or to appear prejudiced. How are these beliefs and motivations going to translate into classroom behavior? For preservice teachers, most will advance into [student](#) teaching, but many still are not in the classrooms when they are taking important pedagogical courses such as educational psychology. They are not yet dealing with real students and students from different groups. They are talking about these issues at an abstract and intellectual level."

Kumar, who emigrated from India in 1991, studies culturally inclusive teaching, self and identity processes and achievement motivation. She was a high school chemistry teacher before earning her Ph.D. in education and psychology at the University of Michigan and transitioning to teach future educators at the collegiate level.

"There has been a distinct difference in the last two years in the way people are responding to my work," Kumar said. "People are starting to recognize culturally inclusive teaching as critically important in educational psychology. It's not easy on our children. There is a social-cultural power dynamic in our educational institutions and definite link between power and knowledge that is valued."

For teachers, Kumar said the key is to cultivate open-mindedness rather than anti-racist training because "open-mindedness includes a repertoire of intellectual virtues such as intellectual humility, intellectual diligence and intellectual courage. Developing these intellectual virtues enable us to become aware of our biases, have the humility to acknowledge that we hold biases and have the courage and persistence to overcome them."

Provided by University of Toledo

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